

Rt Hon Matt Hancock MP
Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
By Email

19 January 2021

Dear Mr Hancock

PPE provision for frontline health and care staff

I write on behalf of the AGP Alliance to urge you to personally intervene as a matter of urgency to ensure that all healthcare professionals have access to FFP3 personal protective equipment (PPE) when working with patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19.

We learned last week that a shocking 49,000 hospital staff are currently off work due to COVID-19, which is leading to huge frontline staffing pressures.ⁱ

At the same time, we received the partial publication of a report from the Independent High Risk Aerosol Generating Procedures (AGPs) Panel, which failed to recognise professionals' pleas for better PPE for frontline healthcare workers for a wider range of procedures.ⁱⁱ This is hugely disappointing.

Both of these things are in the context of the biggest emergency to face the NHS in its entire history. The new variant of SARS-Cov-2 and its massively increased transmissibility have changed the world in which we live and the world in which AGP Alliance members – representing many thousands of healthcare professionals – work. The only thing that does not seem to have changed is Government policy on PPE.

A common sense approach

Given the crisis we are in, we are calling on Government to follow common sense advice and evidence from professional bodies and associations, rather than base policy on the incomplete and poor-quality evidence available about the infectious risks of everyday procedures undertaken by healthcare professionals.

The Government tells us to assume that we have COVID-19 and behave accordingly. You have rightly taken a precautionary approach in your public messaging and in lockdown. It is now time for the Government to take the same precautionary approach to the safety of healthcare staff and assume that the environment in which they are working is giving them COVID-19.

We are not alone in making this plea. Our colleagues at Fresh Air NHS have already published an open letter to you and your fellow political leaders calling for the UK and devolved governments to recognise the importance of airborne transmission of COVID-19, including the new variant which is known to be at least 50% more transmissible, and ensure that measures are in place to protect staff and patients.ⁱⁱⁱ

Furthermore, the British Medical Association has written to NHS Trust Chief Executives, your department and Public Health England asking them to make sure all healthcare

professionals have access to enhanced PPE.^{iv} We salute those trusts across the UK who are taking a pragmatic approach to this issue and ensuring their staff have access to FFP3 masks in particular on red and amber wards where patients are likely to be more infectious.

Independent High Risk AGP Panel Findings

The Panel's review was completed in December 2020 and did not take account of the hugely more infectious new variant, despite delaying its publication until January 2021, which has rendered the review out of date. It is unfortunate that there is no mention of the new variant given it has been known about for many weeks.

We are shocked that despite the Panel's acknowledgement that there is no evidence to suggest healthcare workers are not at risk conducting several of the procedures considered by the Alliance to be at high risk of aerosol generation, no change is being recommended. We are also amazed that the review was not tasked to clarify whether PPE offers sufficient protection to healthcare professionals.

It is clear to us that the current focus of PPE guidance on AGPs is no longer sufficient to keep healthcare professionals safe. Most staff are being infected on wards whether performing AGPs or not. In addition to aerosols from AGPs, the impact of aerosols from coughing in crowded areas, often with poor ventilation, adds to the overall risk to staff even if they are not performing an AGP themselves.

It is also apparent that there is a lack of clarity about who is deciding on PPE guidance. Public Health England and NHS England both state that they use the guidance of the Independent High Risk AGP Panel before changing recommendations whilst the Panel has itself stated that it was not tasked with advising on the efficacy of PPE.

Two key actions

To conclude, we are calling on you to take action in two areas as a matter of urgency:

- **Improved ventilation** - natural ventilation must be improved as much as possible in all clinical settings where standard requirements are not currently met.
- **Improved PPE** - alongside this, it is now time for the Government to adopt a cautionary, safety-first approach to PPE provision, doing all it possibly can to reduce risks to those working with patients with suspected or confirmed COVID-19. Some Trusts are already doing this, and we salute them for it, but we need the Government to make this happen across the whole country.

My colleagues and I would be keen to discuss this further with you if you felt you needed further briefing.

Yours sincerely



Dr Barry Jones
Chair, AGP Alliance

AGP Alliance Members



ⁱ <https://www.england.nhs.uk/statistics/statistical-work-areas/covid-19-hospital-activity/>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/independent-high-risk-agp-panel-summary-of-recommendations>

ⁱⁱⁱ <https://web.archive.org/web/20210109161932/https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSejgqHBTsCjF0G3BdZRHsBzx4cMxZEEEnarozhztDo4tdc4zdQ/viewform>

^{iv} <https://web.archive.org/web/20210113121341/https://www.bma.org.uk/news-and-opinion/call-for-enhanced-ppe>